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Orpheus and the Shades:
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In his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Rilke interprets the myth of the singer's descent to the nether world as an image of the poet who must experience death:

Only by him with whose lays
shades were enraptured
may the celestial praise
faintly be captured.

Only who tasted their own
flower with the sleeping
holds the most fugitive tone
ever in keeping.¹

In *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the novel on which Dickens was working until his death, the central motifs of Rilke's lines can be discovered: John Jasper, the protagonist of the story, is a musician, a singer who is regarded as an author. He 'captures' the celestial praise in the cathedral but he also tastes of the 'flower' and is haunted by the shadows of his opium dreams. Furthermore, he descends to the region of death, a journey most strikingly visualized in chapter 12, when he accompanies the deathlike stonemason, Mr Durdles, to the crypt, his nightly abode.² Jasper, who lives in a 'gatehouse,' is a mysterious border-crosser passing through the doors opened for him by Durdles.

Rilke's poem may help us discern the Orpheus theme in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. But, once the significance of this myth for Dickens has been recognized, the question arises whether it may not also help us come to terms with one of the alleged faults of the only novel in which Dickens tells the life story of a professional writer. Criticism has taken exception to the fact that Dickens, in *David Copperfield*, presents the autobiography of a man who becomes a novelist and yet never discusses the art of novel-writing.³ I will suggest, however, that Dickens, rather than discussing the literary craft in the abstract, has woven a prominent strand of artistic reflection into the fabric of David's 'life.' In particular, the archetypal myth of the poet lends its colour to this thread.

The examples from *Edwin Drood* indicate that Dickens did not choose to retell the mythical story (which would probably have become a burlesque under his hands)⁴ but rather to revitalize it by making its archetypal traits visible under the surface of realistic description. These traits are, in the main, the descent into the underworld⁵ and the idea of the poet as a man living near a border, which he oversteps in both directions. Both elements are present in *David Copperfield*.

David's *catabasis* and mythical role-playing will be my first topic here, leading up to the function of music in his attempts to recover several Eurydice figures, and to the typological connections between Orpheus, David, and Christ. *Tertium comparationis* is the redeeming function of poetry in the form of commemorative narration. This will bring into view the relation between David's life journey and the narrative act itself; David's crossing the border between life and death can be seen as analogous to the interplay between fiction and reality, 'life' and 'life,' which is pointed out in the very first sentences of the novel.⁶

I

When David has returned to London to become a proctor, he compares his new existence with the time when he was sent to London by Mr Murdstone in order to 'begin the world on [his] own account' (10.131):⁷

when the coach was gone, I turned my face to the Adelphi, pondering on the old days when I used to roam about its subterranean arches, and on the happy changes which had brought me to the surface. (23.303)

David describes the change in his life in terms of a vertical movement: the 'subterranean arches' of old are set against 'the surface.' This vertical line may be prolonged even further, since David's apartment in the Adelphi is located 'on top of the house' (302). In retrospect, David's comment gives particular weight to an earlier passage, where the Adelphi is presented as a stage that includes what is called 'hell' in theatrical language:⁸

I was fond of wandering about the Adelphi, because it was a mysterious place, with those dark arches. I see myself emerging one evening from some of these arches, on a little public-house close to the river, with an open space before it, where some coal-heavers were dancing; to look at whom, I sat down upon a bench. (11.138)

The dance of the coal-heavers performed before David as the audience makes it quite clear that the Adelphi functions as a stage setting. Theatrical associations are underscored by the fact that David Garrick

lived there for a time,⁹ and by the proximity of the Adelphi Theatre, where adaptations of Dickens' *Christmas Books* were repeatedly performed.¹⁰ Connotations of theatricality and mystery are combined in the name of this place, echoing the Greek 'Delphi.' Though the arches are expressly called 'subterranean' only in chapter 23, the earlier passage already alludes to underworld regions: the colliers (who were certainly rather black in the face) may be associated with Satan (as we know from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*);¹¹ they fit very well into a demonic atmosphere evoked by expressions like 'dark arches' and 'mysterious place.' In addition, the ill-famed Adelphi arches were known as 'shades' in contemporary London.¹² Thus, the very name of the scene points to Hades or hell, an association to which may be added a near-anagram of 'Adelphi,' 'asphodel,' the plant of the underworld, better known as the daffodil.

But it is not only the Adelphi which makes us regard the child's time in London as a descent to the underworld. The house where David has to work is located 'at the bottom of a narrow street' (11.132). An atmosphere of death is evoked by this rat-infested and decayed place, where David is 'thrown away' (132) and loses his name (139). Both the Adelphi and Murdstone and Grinby's are situated upon the river, which may be taken as another hint at the topography of Hades, especially since the polluted Thames in Dickens is repeatedly depicted as a mythical river of death. This is most obvious in *Our Mutual Friend*,¹³ but it also comes to the fore in chapter 47 of *David Copperfield*, where Martha, wishing to die, is magnetically drawn to the river. The Thames's appearing as Styx, Acheron, or Lethe underlines the fact that David's catabasis is a crossing of the border between life and death.

Young David Copperfield's two journeys to London, to Mr Creakle's school and to Murdstone and Grinby's, both represent such a passage. Both times Mr Murdstone wants to get rid of him, and both times David has to go his own way in utter solitude. The waiter in chapter 5, for instance, reigns supreme over a dining room which appears to David to be a foreign country where he is 'cast away' (57). The waiter tells him the story of a certain 'Mr. Topsawyer,' who died in this room (57-8), and devours, vulture-like, the greater part of David's dinner. Moreover, David has to give him one of his bright shillings before he is allowed to pass on. Later, all alone, he will sit down on a luggage scale at the coach-office, where he imagines himself starving to death (5.62) before a man appears 'dressed in a suit of black clothes,' who looks 'gaunt, sallow ... with hollow cheeks' and has 'a chin almost as black as Mr. Murdstone's' (63). This death-figure (who only later turns out to be the humane Mr Mell) has come to fetch David and crosses the river with him. The dismal sounds of his flute make David fall into a state of sleepiness which is described in terms of dissolution and death: 'he fades, and all fades, and

there is no flute, no Master, no Salem House, no David Copperfield, no anything but heavy sleep' (65). These signs of a descent to the realm of death are underscored by David's coffin-like box, which accompanies him on both his journeys to London and with which he almost identifies, feeling as if he 'were weighed, bought, delivered, and paid for' (63).

David's journey to London, however, is not simply a movement from life to death. He remembers his home not only as a paradise but also as the location of his father's grave. The view of the churchyard from his bedroom window belongs to his earliest memories, where it is closely connected with the story of Lazarus (2.12). Thus, paradoxically, David's later descent to the underworld is also a return or retreat, expressive of his longing to 'travel back' to his original home (like the speaker of Henry Vaughan's 'The Retreat'). David is literally a 'posthumous child,' born into a world of death, to which the dead father (of whom he has a 'shadowy remembrance') seems more properly to belong than his living but 'murderous' surrogate (1.2). David Copperfield, wandering about the Adelphi arches, is *a-delphos* indeed, a Greek word which can denote being 'cut off from one's mother's womb.'¹⁴

Mr Micawber, David's helpless friend during his time in London, calls the grave 'that place of universal resort' and quotes from Gray's 'Elegy': 'Each in his narrow cell ...' (49.608). His own particular resort is the cell of the King's Bench prison, which was traditionally called 'Hell' but which, to him, is 'that retreat' (603). He regards the prison and the grave as his shelters from the struggle for existence, but nevertheless he fights a duel with death and the devil in the person of the 'transcendent and immortal hypocrite and perjurer,' Uriah Heep (607).¹⁵ Mr Micawber is prepared to die in order to overcome death. This is where a central motif of the Orpheus myth and its typological points of reference (David and Christ) become visible. Young David Copperfield's journey to the city of the dead is marked by a paradoxical change similar to Mr Micawber's fight. The child transforms death into life by inventing stories for the nameless shadows he encounters there (11.144-5). When he leaves home, he takes leave of the grave as well:

See, how our house and church are lessening in the distance; how the grave beneath the tree is blotted out by intervening objects; how the spire points upward from my old playground no more, and the sky is empty! (10.132)

The motif of pointing upwards will be repeated in Agnes's gesture at the end of David's story; it thus indicates that the end of his life journey links up with its beginning. As in Kleist's parable 'On the Puppet Theatre,' origin and perfection are the same; the childhood paradise,¹⁶ which has to be regained by means of a journey round the globe (de-

picted on the original cover of *David Copperfield*), has always been the grave.¹⁷ Mr Omer the undertaker expresses a similar idea when he speaks of approaching death as a return to childhood, 'when a man is drawing on to a time of life, where the two ends of life meet; when he finds himself, however hearty he is, being wheeled about for the second time' (51.628). The topos of old age being a stage of 'second childishness' (*As You Like It* II.vii.164) is lent expression through the combination of an onward movement ('drawing on') and a return, a combination characteristic of the narrative process itself. The adult narrator returns to his childhood in his memory while at the same time he moves forward and accompanies his former self on his journey. The journey is circular ('where the two ends of life meet') but nevertheless has a *telos*: 'we are all drawing on to the bottom of the hill, whatever age we are, on account of time never standing still for a single moment' (628). This goal, the hill, is not just the mound of the grave; it is comparable to George Herbert's 'hill, where lay / My expectation' (or rather the hill which lies even further away).¹⁸

In *David Copperfield*, Mr Micawber, and Mr Omer, the reader finds expressed the Christian idea that the moment of birth marks the beginning of death.¹⁹ More specifically, however, David enacts the story of Orpheus, who has to suffer loss and death in going away from the underworld and in looking backwards (the word 'retrospect,' for instance, occurs in four chapter headings). The ambivalence or reversal of world and underworld is perhaps most clearly visible in David's escape from London. On the one hand, he will be reborn at the home of Betsey Trotwood; he becomes 'a New Boy in more senses than one' (title of chapter 16). On the other hand, however, his very departure from the city of the dead is characterized by mythological features which mark his entry into the realm of death. In this respect, the end of chapter 12 is exemplary of the manner in which Dickens makes mythical archetypes shine through the veil of his narrative. David here paradoxically speaks of his death, 'taking very little more out of the world, towards the retreat of my aunt, Miss Betsey, than I had brought into it' (12.153). In the light of Mr Micawber's usage, the word 'retreat' is an additional reference to the grave. The role of Charon in David's passage is played by the long-legged young man with the donkey-cart, who finally makes off with David's coffin-like box. This young man insistently tries to lure David to the 'pollis':

The young man still replied: 'Come to the pollis!' and was dragging me against the donkey in a violent manner, as if there were an affinity between that animal and a magistrate, when he changed his mind, jumped into the cart, sat upon my box, and, exclaiming that he would drive to the pollis straight, rattled away harder than ever. (12.153)

The 'pollis' to which David is to be taken is little else than a travesty of the Greek city of the dead. This interpretation of the change of 'police' into 'pollis' is supported by a similar travesty of the Greek custom of putting ferry-money for Charon in the mouths of the dead:

Being much flushed and excited, I tumbled my half-guinea out of my pocket in pulling the card out. I put it in my mouth for safety, and though my hands trembled a good deal, had just tied the card on very much to my satisfaction, when I felt myself violently chucked under the chin by the long-legged young man, and saw my half-guinea fly out of my mouth into his hand. (12.152-3)

II

The figure of Orpheus in his mountain exile, lamenting the death of his spouse, is part of many versions of the myth. It is to be found in Vergil's *Georgics*, as well as in King Alfred's translation of Boethius.²⁰ David's last catabasis, after Dora's death, leads him into a deep mountain valley in Switzerland. It is a 'descent' to a place of 'tranquillity' and 'peace,' from which he can see 'the evening sun ... shining on the remote heights of snow, that closed in, like eternal clouds' (58.697). This shelter, suggestive of the rest of death, is not a barren grave like the great city. The valley is 'richly green,' and David will be recalled from this exile back to life through the sounds of 'not earthly music' (698). This almost magical function of music in the novel parallels its function in the myth of the poet-singer.

Dickens attaches great importance to music in presenting David's mental and emotional development. David's name first draws attention to this: he is called after the singer of the Psalms, whom mythographers traditionally connected with Orpheus. There are, for instance, pictures on which David-Orpheus is accompanied by his muse, Melodia.²¹ According to tradition, Orpheus owes his inspiration to Apollo, who is regarded as his father. This is one of the typological links with David, who sings his Psalms by virtue of divine inspiration, having descended, like Orpheus, to the depths of hell: 'The sorrows of hell compassed me about: the snares of death prevented me' (Psalm 18:5). To his secular Victorian namesake, the inspiring force is represented by Melodia-like Agnes. Her name not only echoes Latin *agnus* but is also an anagram of *agens*, pointing to her active role in David's life. In David's description, the expression 'cordial voice,' referring to Agnes, is repeated like a leitmotif;²² even more conspicuous is her ability to make David tunefully resound like a musical instrument:

With the unerring instinct of her noble heart, she touched the chords of my memory so softly and harmoniously, that not one jarred within me; I could

listen to the sorrowful, distant music, and desire to shrink from nothing it awoke. (60.718)

David's 'chords' are tuned to Agnes' 'cordial voice.' This affinity, expressed in homophones of *cor*, the heart, is underlined by the narrator's emphasis on Agnes' 'noble heart.' In an earlier passage, David has already spoken of Agnes' 'voice that seemed to touch a chord within me, answering to that sound alone' (25.313). The topos is best known from Shakespeare's eighth sonnet:

Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,
Strikes each in each by mutual ordering;

The string of the heart as a string or chord of a harp is a mystical image as well as a poetic conceit. In George Herbert's 'Temper (1)', for example, God tunes the stringed instrument of the human heart; or, to name a classical text, in Aristides Quintilianus' treatise *De musica* the human soul is compared to the string of a lyre stretched between heaven and earth.²³ In the passage just quoted it is David's memory on which Agnes plays as on a musical instrument and which is thus included in the metaphor of the heart.²⁴

In the mythical story which is transformed and re-enacted in *David Copperfield*, Agnes plays a role similar to that of Eurydice. She has to be liberated, for instance, from the clutches of that underworld demon, Uriah Heep. Furthermore, Agnes is the one who, through her inspiring presence, enables David to write the story of his life. This function reflects a tradition of interpreting Eurydice allegorically as *sapientia*. Eurydice-Sapientia gives purpose and substance to *eloquentia*, represented by Orpheus. In musical terms, *ratio* must be the foundation of *vox* in order that an effective work of art may be created.²⁵ However difficult modern readers may find it to appreciate her, Agnes is a being who belongs to the Platonic world of ideas ('She was so true, she was so beautiful, she was so good,' 60.718). She represents the perfect, inaudible harmony of which the speaker or singer must partake if his audible sounds are to attain form: Agnes as the 'Heavenly light' by which David can 'see all other objects' (64.751) is the visual equivalent to this musical idealism.

Only the perspective of heaven, pointed out by Agnes at the end of the book, makes it possible for David to descend to the shadows, to remember and tell his story. This may be gathered from the description of the time when David still believes it is his fate to renounce Agnes:

I was not happy; but, thus far, I had faithfully set a seal upon the Past, and, thinking of her, pointing upward, thought of her as pointing to that sky above me, where, in the mystery to come, I might yet love her with a love unknown

on earth, and tell her what the strife had been within me when I loved her here.
(60.723)

In this passage, where Agnes has not yet become David's ideal in reality but remains a purely transcendental one, he regards his past as forever locked away. Telling the story of his life is still impossible to him. Only in Agnes' presence will the book of memory be written, the seal opened, and the veil lifted from the darkest periods of his life.²⁶ A parallel to this passage can be found in chapter 48, where David, Orpheus-like, despairs of recapturing his life with Agnes from the realm of death:

and then the contented days with Agnes, in the dear old house, arose before me, like spectres of the dead, that might have some renewal in another world, but never more could be reanimated here. (48.595)

The happy ending of their story, however, does not imply a fundamental revision of the mythical pattern. It may be found not only in post-Renaissance, sentimental versions of the Orpheus myth, like Gluck's opera, but also in Euripides.²⁷ The happy outcome is characteristic of medieval versions of the story (like *Sir Orfeo*) and also occurs in Calderón's *Divino Orfeo*, where Orpheus-Christ for ever liberates the human soul (Eurydice) from the dominion of death.

Just as David does not simply 'stand for' Orpheus, there is no clear-cut allegorical representative of Eurydice. But he (or rather, Dickens) transforms his sorrowful experience by suggesting that his life story bears traits of the myth of the poet. Accordingly, the motifs of remembrance, music, and the heart, reflecting elements of the Orpheus myth, refer to several female figures who are recalled by David-Orpheus from the shades of his memory to the light of his narrative. Dora and David's mother, as well as Little Em'ly and Rosa Dartle, are all characterized by different modes of musical expression.

Dora is the woman who cannot follow David-Orpheus back into life. Her guitar is emblematic of a playful world of dreams which cannot be made to harmonize with David's insight that 'we must work, to live' (37.464):

After tea we had the guitar; and Dora sang those same dear old French songs about the impossibility of ever on any account leaving off dancing, La ra la, La ra la, until I felt a much greater Monster than before. (464)

David's consciousness of two worlds separated by an insurmountable barrier goes together with his self-accusation as a 'Monster' who has irresponsibly given in to the siren song of Dora's 'enchanted ballads' (26.336). In a nightmare, David realizes that Dora is finally unattainable for him.

To him, her dancing appears to be a demonic compulsion:

I heard the music incessantly playing one tune, and saw Dora incessantly dancing one dance, without taking the least notice of me. The man who had been playing the harp all night, was trying in vain to cover it with an ordinary sized nightcap, when I awoke; or I should rather say, when I left off trying to go to sleep ... (35.431)

Dickens here takes up a romantic motif familiar from Hoffmann's 'The Sandman,' in which the student Nathanael desperately falls in love with the dancing doll Olympia, whose life is but a figment of his own imagination, instigated by the magician Dr Coppelius. The grotesque image of Dora shows her dancing a demonic dance of death, which, like the red shoes in Andersen's fairy tale, cannot be stopped. The 'incessant tune' is a direct reference to the 'music' emerging from Omer and Joram's coffin workshop, 'the tune that never *does* leave off' (21.261). David's dream represents the reality of his life, the fact that Dora is the bride of Death, whom he cannot defeat. She actually does not dance in his dream but in his vision, intruding upon him while he vainly tries to get to sleep.

The man who plays the harp may be regarded as an image of David himself, who later comes to acknowledge Agnes as the true player of this very instrument. David's attempt to find sleep is reflected in the figure of the man who tries to cover the harp with a nightcap. It is David who makes the music which forces Dora to dance, doing harm to both. The waking dream highlights the element of guilt inextricably linked with David's existence as an artist. At the same time, however, the dream serves to point out David's later change. He gives up his determination to play the music (having Dora dance to his tune) and succeeds in telling his story after he has become an instrument played by his beloved. The ambivalent function of music in David's relationship with Dora is also expressed by David's feeling the pain of his wrong choice 'like a strain of sorrowful music faintly heard in the night' (48.594). David, in this connection, repeatedly speaks of the 'old unhappy want or loss of something' (44.552), thus echoing the tragic dimension of Eurydice's fate. When Dora's guitar appears for the last time, it has become a silent instrument indeed, literally beyond the reach of David's words: the illustration on which we see Agnes announcing Dora's death ('My child-wife's old companion,' 53.658) shows her guitar with two strings broken and a sheet of music in front of it entitled 'Requiem – Mozart.' Once more the Thames appears as a river of death: the ferryman looms darkly from outside the window.²⁸

The story of Steerforth and Little Em'ly serves as a foil to David's transformation into a melodious instrument. Steerforth makes an instrument of her, not in the sense of bringing her to life but of bending her to

his will. The 'musical sounds' of her laughter (21.270) are the result of the seductive storytelling of Steerforth, who succeeds in touching 'the prevailing chord' (269) in the Peggotty family with great skill.

The ambivalent character of music is made even clearer, perhaps, in the portrayal of Rosa Dartle, who represents a type of 'unheard music' directly opposed to the harmony embodied by Agnes. Steerforth asks her to sing but he cannot control her voice as he does little Em'ly's. David describes her song as 'most unearthly' and discovers 'something fearful' in its reality:

It was as if it had never been written, or set to music, but sprung out of the passion within her; which found imperfect utterance in the low sounds of her voice, and crouched again when all was still. I was dumb when she leaned beside the harp again, playing it, but not sounding it, with her right hand. (29.372)

Miss Dartle's music is presented as a perverted echo of the Platonic relation between original form and reflected image: her audible sounds imperfectly represent to the senses an unearthly power – which does not, however, belong to the world of ideas. It is not rational but irrational and demonic. The animating metaphor 'crouched' (cf 'sprung') makes her passion appear like a crouching demon figure such as those that can be seen, for instance, in Canterbury cathedral. This 'religious' association will be less surprising when one thinks of the demonic harpists in Milton's Hell (*Paradise Lost* 2.552–5) and compares Rosa Dartle's jealous passion to that of Satan, who 'unfulfilled with pain of longing pines' (4.511). David is captured by Miss Dartle's song, which makes him fall into a 'trance' (372). In the trial of this siren song, the menacing or dark side of music is experienced by the narrator-protagonist, who 'loves music from his soul' (29.372) and whose innocence is explicitly referred to in the context of Miss Dartle's performance (373). This kind of music does not characterize the goal of his journey, but he must learn to know it before he can attain its counterpart. David's encounter with Rosa Dartle shows that the Orpheus myth is not reflected literally but symbolically, as a catabasis which makes the narrator-poet aware of the dangers of his art:

With other notes than to the Orphean lyre
I sung of Chaos and eternal Night,
Taught by the heavenly Muse to venture down
The dark descent, and up to reascend
Though hard and rare ... (*Paradise Lost* 2.17–21)

Among the women David Copperfield tries to recover from the depths of the past his mother assumes a prominent position because it is she

who makes David 'long to travel back' to childhood. Such a journey, impossible as it is in nature, may be made by means of storytelling and mythical repetition or identification. When David comes home from Mr Creakle's school, for instance, he is 'going home when it was not home ... like a dream I could never dream again' (8.93). David listens to his mother singing while she rocks his little brother to sleep, and through her song the impossible becomes reality; new life is given to his lost home:

God knows how infantine the memory may have been, that was awakened within me by the sound of my mother's voice in the old parlor, when I set foot in the hall. She was singing in a low tone. I think I must have lain in her arms, and heard her singing so to me when I was but a baby. The strain was new to me, and yet it was so old that it filled my heart brim-full ... (8.94)

David identifies with his little brother by remembering a pattern or archetype through which he recognizes the 'new' strain as being 'so old.' David's memory is presented here as supertemporal or mythical, almost as if it belonged to one of those strange young-old children who repeatedly turn up in Dickens' novels – 'old-fashioned' Paul Dombey, for example, who finally represents 'the old, old fashion – Death' and 'that older fashion yet, of Immortality.'²⁹

David, in his story, returns home to his mother. He regards his narrative not just rhetorically as a manner of *energeia* or animation but quite literally as a life-giving process. David's evocation of his mother's living breath is suggestive of Orpheus trying to lead Eurydice back from the shades. David's 'chords of memory' conjure up the image of the past and thus, musically, give new life to his mother.³⁰

Can I say of her innocent and girlish beauty, that it faded, and was no more, when its breath falls on my cheek now, as it fell that night? Can I say she ever changed, when my remembrance brings her back to life, thus, only; and, truer to its loving youth than I have been, or man ever is, still holds fast what it cherished then? (2.21)

The passage obviously reflects upon the narrative process itself, but its actual meaning turns out to be rather elusive.³¹ Owing to a certain syntactic ambiguity the remembered image (the young mother) and the process of remembering become interchangeable. The expression 'its loving youth,' to which David's 'remembrance' mysteriously remains more faithful than he himself does (or man in general), at first seems to refer to the 'life' of his young mother. But then 'its loving youth' is complemented by 'it cherished then,' undoubtedly referring to David's remembrance. Both expressions thus denote the youth of his memory.

At this point, however, we should recall that Mnemosyne is the mother of the Muses.³² 'Mother' and 'remembrance,' syntactically coalesced with

one another, are mythically cognate. What seems confusing from the viewpoint of syntactic logic makes sense when considered mythically. The origin of David's narrative art is both his mother (with regard to his life) and his memory (with regard to his 'life,' his story). One of the central motifs of the Orpheus myth, the crossing of borders, is thus reflected by Dickens not only on the level of action or story but also, stylistically, on the level of syntax. David's (or rather Dickens') language is identical with what it represents.

III

When David comes home to Blunderstone in chapter 8, he identifies with his little brother, returning to his own earliest childhood and experiencing motherly love as an original image of his memory. Amplified by a religious dimension, this constellation is taken up again towards the end of chapter 13, where David is looking down upon the sea from the window of his newly found home at Miss Betsey's:

After I had said my prayers, and the candle had burnt out, I remember how I still sat looking at the moonlight on the water, as if I could hope to read my fortune in it, as in a bright book; or to see my mother with her child, coming from Heaven, along that shining path, to look upon me as she had looked when I last saw her sweet face. (13.170)

What makes this passage relevant to the Orpheus theme is not only the dead woman coming back to life but the Christian iconography of the scene. The woman with the child, who, as David hopes, comes from heaven and appears in a beam of light upon the sea, is an image of *stella maris*, Mary and the infant Jesus serving as a beacon and guide on a man's journey of life. In spite of Dickens' distrust of Catholicism, this image does not entirely come as a surprise when one thinks of the dream vision Dickens had in Italy in 1844. Forster reports that the spirit of Mary Hogarth appeared to Dickens in the form of a Madonna by Raphael.³³ David, who speaks of his brother as 'the little creature in her arms, [who] was myself,' is confronted with an image both of himself in his mother's arms and of Christ and Mary. This implicit connection between David and Christ is pointed out in the same chapter by Mr. Dick, who calls his new friend 'David's son' (13.164, 169, 14.184) and thus addresses him by one of the biblical names of Christ.³⁴ Mr Dick combines this address with a pagan one when he calls him 'Phoebus' elsewhere (14.172); the sun god, however, is just another *figura Christi*.³⁵

The pattern of roles set up by the autobiographical narrator clearly refers to typology. In the course of the Middle Ages, the configuration of Orpheus-David-Christ became one of the most common typological schemes.³⁶ The themes of death and renewed life, expression of *pain de*

profundis and divinely inspired song served to knit the relationship between these figures very closely. In Victorian England, typological thought was revived in theology as well as in poetry.³⁷ And in America, only a few years after the publication of *David Copperfield*, Walt Whitman played the mythical role of Orpheus-Christ as a poetic creator and redeemer, who may give new life to the dead.³⁸

David's implicit identification with Christ should be seen against the background of Mr Murdstone's and Uriah Heep's self-deification. Mr Murdstone 'sets up an image of himself, and calls it the Divine Nature' (59.714), and Uriah Heep makes 'his forgiving nature the subject of a most impious and awful parallel' (61.731). Dickens thus emphasizes, upon a symbolic level, that there are similarities between David and the two villains, who are his counterparts upon the level of action. To some extent, their blasphemous self-aggrandizement reflects David's own aspirations. His very fight against the death-and-devil Uriah Heep puts him in a biblical perspective, since David's fight against Goliath has traditionally been regarded as a type of Christ's victory over death.³⁹

The interpretative key to David's godlike position, explaining its magnificence as well as its danger, is the topos of the godlike nature of the poet.⁴⁰ His self-love is the reverse side of the poet's participation in the divine. Aunt Betsey, for instance, sees 'ambition, love of approbation, sympathy, and much more' (62.735) at the roots of David's desire to become a writer. David knows that his 'selfishness' is 'inseparable from Dora' (35.431). But we also find expressed the idea that the poet may overcome his self-love through his work, a thought for which Shakespeare's Sonnet 62 is the *locus classicus*. What enables the poet to identify with his beloved is the fact that the poem has become his genuine self: 'Tis thee, myself, that for myself I praise, / Painting my age with beauty of thy days.' In a similar way, David overcomes his self-love through Agnes, who inspires the poet-narrator and enables him to write his autobiography.⁴¹ David's 'life' (the story) is the genuine self, which even, without presumption, permits him to identify with Christ. David's autobiography escapes the danger of narcissism, since he aims to be true to others by means of a catabasis into the depths of his memory: 'Can I say she ever changed, when my remembrance brings her back to life, thus only ...?'

IV

Dickens, in *David Copperfield*, did not write an autobiography but chose autobiographic writing as a paradigm of poetic creation. This distinction is related to the tension between poetic self-contemplation and the losing (and thus, paradoxically, gaining) of one's self in a work that transforms what is historically contingent into the life of a suprapersonal poetic

image. The representation of the author's self does not appear to be the purpose of his descent into the depths of his memory, but his story of remembrance is representative of a poetic art which transcends time and gives new life to the dead. Typological references in *David Copperfield* thus serve to point out an aesthetic aim: narrative poetry as *imitatio Christi* in a secularized world and as mimesis of a redemption from death through memory and love.

David Copperfield, in narrating the story of his life, repeatedly emphasizes its shadowlike character. In accordance with the ambiguity of the word 'life,' he thus implies that his life itself is like a shadow. This becomes most obvious in the final passage of the book:

O Agnes, o my soul, so may thy face be by me when I close my life indeed; so may I, when realities are melting from me like the shadows which I now dismiss, still find thee near me, pointing upward! (64.751)

The two meanings of 'life' go together with the distinction between 'realities' and 'shadows,' which are connected by 'like.' This distinction (and connection through similarity), however, is made ambiguous by the context. 'And now, as I close my task ... these faces fade away,' we read only a few lines earlier. The expression 'these faces,' like 'the shadows which I now dismiss,' denotes the presence of David's poetic vision. The persons to whom 'these faces' belong are, in all probability, the faces 'in the fleeting crowd' conjured up at the beginning of the chapter (748). But David then goes on to tell us about people who are his present companions – Traddles, for instance, who talks with him about his hopes for the future. Towards the end of his story, David thus regards his 'reality,' the presence of other people, as shadowlike – with the exception of Agnes. In her presence, David the narrator experiences a reality which is 'higher' or 'more real' than the reality of his surroundings or his story, but even this higher reality is, in the end, as unreal as the reality of his narrative. The infinite reflection ensuing from this (the shadow of poetic mimesis reveals the shadowlike character of the reality to which it belongs) leads to a dissolution of boundary lines. His autobiography, which David elsewhere has called his 'record' and his 'written memory' (48.588–9) becomes as dreamlike as the reality in which the act of writing takes place. He ceases to distinguish between dream and reality in view of a reality which renders both illusory. To this reality David hopes to be led by Agnes in the hour of his death. Thus, finally, life and story are shown to have a common point of reference. In *David Copperfield*, this *tertium comparationis* becomes visible as the mythical archetype forming the background to David's 'life.' And, as if to make the process come full circle, this mythical background is formed by the story of the artist who transcends the borderline of life and death.

The particular way in which Dickens makes use of the literary topos of *La vida es sueño*⁴² is obviously meant as a reference to Shakespeare. Prospero, both when he abjures his 'rough magic' and in his epilogue, assumes a position at once within and without the action on stage.⁴³ Similarly, Puck in his epilogue ('If we shadows have offended') makes obvious the close relationship between life and the shadows of poetry when he stretches out his hand across the insuperable borderline between stage and audience: 'Give me your hands ...' The audience who have 'but slumber'd here / While these visions did appear' are, for a moment, made aware of their own insubstantial nature before they are released to everyday life. This is what happens when the 'shadows' are 'dismissed' at the end of *David Copperfield*, which also means putting an end to the reader's immediate participation in the story.

As I have pointed out, the beginning and the end of David's narrative are marked by a play upon the word 'life,' meaning both the biography and the reality of his existence. The story and the life in and about which it is told coalesce in the very act of distinguishing them. To David, telling the story of his life means a conjuring up of shadows. Both life and story are regarded as shadows in phrases like 'the shadowy events of that imaginative world in which I lived' (62.734). This is underlined by David's final words, 'the shadows which I now dismiss ...,' and Dickens' words in his preface to the novel, about 'how an Author feels as if he were dismissing some portion of himself into the shadowy world, when a crowd of the creatures of his brain are going from him for ever' (lxxi). The parallel confirms that in *David Copperfield*, by presenting a narrator concerned with the relation between his story and his life, Dickens himself reflects on the relation between literary fiction and reality. While to David, who lives in an 'imaginative world,' the story of his life has the 'shadowy' character of literary fiction, to Dickens, the fictional story is part of his real life ('some portion of himself').

Against the background of *David Copperfield* 'the shadowy world' is an ambiguous expression. At the end of chapter 1, life is called a journey that is limited by 'the earthly bourne of all such travellers' (1.11). This also alludes to the fact that the cosmos of the novel is limited, that it has a beginning and an end. The 'tremendous region whence I had so lately travelled' (1.11) is the realm beyond these limits, where some people will remain for ever, like David's sister, who only exists in Betsey Trotwood's imagination. This country is called 'the land of dreams and shadows.' When Dickens the author speaks of 'the shadowy world,' he refers to a region of death where part of himself will go after the creatures of his brain have become verbal reality. At the same time, however, he refers to the work of his imagination, which he dismisses into the reality where books are bought and read. But this reality is 'shadowy,' too. The temporality of the artistic process is regarded as analogous to the temporality

of life (limited by a 'death' when both come to their end), as well as to the journey of David's life story. This very parallel between creative process and temporal work of art, however, also reverses the analogy to life and death: only when the creative process has come to its end will the work of art come alive.

If 'the land of dreams and shadows' is a storehouse of images, or, in abstract terms, a creative potential, this is actualized in the ordered language of David's story. Dickens' concept can be described by means of the Aristotelian terms *energeia* (*actus*) and *dynamis* (*potentia*),⁴⁴ the land of dreams and shadows being the (insubstantial) matter taken by the author to form his characters and verbal images. These terms are congenial to Dickens, especially since *energeia* also denotes (to use Sidney's expression in the *Apology for Poetry*) the 'forcibleness' of a writer by which a shadowy subject matter is transformed into the vivid presence of characters and their speech, of scenes and action. Life is temporal and unique, as opposed to the dreams and shadows, which exist 'for ever.' Dickens stresses this temporal aspect when he speaks of the 'creatures of his brain,' who take leave of him 'for ever' when he has finished his work.

To Dickens, the relation between time and timelessness with regard to poetic creation was an ongoing concern. He allegorized it in his early *Master Humphrey's Clock*, where the reader is presented with a group of old men who meet every week in order to read out to each other manuscripts of stories kept within the case of a big grandfather clock. The storytellers thus want 'to beguile time from the heart of time itself.'⁴⁵ As if to illustrate the fulfilment of this wish for a transcendence of time in narrative, one of the stories told by Master Humphrey soon begins to break through the temporal limits set by its narrative frame: *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In the figure of Miss Havisham, the later Dickens created an emblem of the disastrous attempt to transcend time by negating it. Her stopping of the clocks, however, is a sign not only of her deathlike state but also of the fact that her story has never been told. Paradoxically, she becomes alive only during a brief moment before her death when she makes her story fully known to Pip (*Great Expectations*, chapter 49).

While to Dickens and his narrator in *David Copperfield* the completion of their work implies its dismissal into a shadowy world, the singular and individual story may in its turn attain new life. The dichotomy between life and death or actual and potential story is in fact a dialectical one. Like the storehouse of images which are actualized in the literary work of art, the work is itself a land of shadows which may be actualized by the individual reader. This is again a temporal process, as distinct from the timelessness of the work; every reader comes to the moment of which Dickens speaks in his preface, when the characters of the book are taking leave of him or her: 'Once and for all / it's Orpheus when there's song.' The phrase from Rilke's fifth Sonnet to Orpheus⁴⁶ exactly describes

the characteristic uniqueness expressed in the words 'for ever' in the preface and the first chapter of *David Copperfield*, for this uniqueness is also 'for all'; 'for ever' indicates both a final farewell and an eternal presence of the figures who have become real inhabitants of the shadowy realm of poetic fiction. That is to say, in the language of the Orpheus myth: the acts of bringing Eurydice back to life and of taking leave of her are indissolubly linked. Dora and Agnes thus appear to be embodiments of the same idea.

NOTES

This paper is based on chapter 8 of my book, *Das Leben als Geschichte: Poetische Reflexion in Dickens' 'David Copperfield'* (Cologne: Böhlau 1991), 187–241.

- 1 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, with an English translation by J.B. Leishman (London: Hogarth Press 1957), part 1, no 9, pp 50–1. The German reads: 'Nur wer die Leier schon hob / auch unter Schatten, / darf das unendliche Lob / ahnend erstatten. // Nur wer mit Toten vom Mohn / aß, von dem ihren, / wird nicht den leisesten Ton / wieder verlieren.'
- 2 For Jasper as an author, see the Oxford Illustrated Edition of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, ed Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1972), 10.100. For Durdles' affinity to death, see especially 4.29. Cf also Jasper's and Durdles' return from the crypt: 'The appearance of the unconscious Durdles, holding the door open for his companion to follow, as if from the grave, is ghastly enough' (12.107).
- 3 See, for example, Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens* (London: Athlone Press 1970, repr 1985), who calls *David Copperfield* 'one of the strangest portraits of an artist ever written' (124), and Philip Collins, *Charles Dickens: 'David Copperfield'* (London: Arnold 1977), esp 39–40. The question '*David Copperfield*: A Künstlerroman?' has also been taken up by Irène Simon in *RES* ns 43 (1992), 40–56.
- 4 Dickens thus shuns both such 'burlesque' and 'serious' treatments of mythical subjects as were chosen, for example, by Fielding (cf his *Eurydice*) and Offenbach, on the one hand, and by Tennyson and Wagner, on the other. A telling example is Dickens' reaction to an adaptation of *Paradise Lost* on a Paris stage; see John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, vol 2 (London: Dent 1969), 164.
- 5 Marc Beckwith has pointed out the similarity between visits to Tom-All-Alone's in *Bleak House* (chs 22 and 46) and the descent to the underworld in Dante's *Divina commedia* and Virgil's *Aeneid*; 'Catabasis in *Bleak House*: Bucket as Sibyl,' *Dickens Quarterly* 1 (1984), 2–6.
- 6 See *Das Leben als Geschichte*, ch 2.
- 7 *David Copperfield*, ed Nina Burgis (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
- 8 See, for instance, Leslie Hotson, *Shakespeare's Wooden O* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis 1959) 32ff.

- 9 See N. Bentley, M. Slater, and N. Burgis, eds, *The Dickens Index* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988), 'Adelphi.'
- 10 Forster 1:100-1 and 305; 2:56. On 19 December 1849, Dickens wrote to Miss Coutts about the adaptation of *The Haunted Man*: 'I discovered yesterday, that barbarous murder was being done upon me at the Adelphi.' *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol 5, ed Graham Story and K. J. Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981), 460.
- 11 III.iv.117-19; cf J.M. Lothian and T.W. Craik's note on this passage in the Arden edition of the play (London: Methuen 1975).
- 12 See *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, ed Ivor H. Evans, 2nd ed (London: Cassell 1981), 'Adelphi'; cf also Forster, 1:28.
- 13 The novel begins with the well-known scene in which Gaffer Hexam appears as a fisherman collecting drowned bodies. Peter Dronke, 'The Return of Eurydice,' *Classica et Mediaevalia* 23 (1962), 198-215, refers to the image of Charon collecting souls in his boat. On the Thames as a mythical river in Dickens, see Avrom Fleishman, 'The City and the River: Dickens' Symbolic Landscape (*Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit*),' in *Studies in the Later Dickens*, ed Jean-Claude Amalric (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry 1973), 111-26; see also Roselee Robison, 'Time, Death, and the River in Dickens' Novels,' *ES* 53 (1972), 436-54, and Lucien Pothe, *Mythe et tradition populaire dans l'imaginaire dickensien* (Paris: Lettres modernes 1979), esp 123-5.
- 14 Its primary meaning, of course, is 'brother' (another reference to the stage, cf Terence's *Adelphoe*). The idea of the grave as a womb is associated with the myth of Proserpina, and also with its poetic metamorphosis in Romeo's expression, 'womb of death' (*Romeo and Juliet* v.iii.45).
- 15 Mrs Micawber speaks of the antagonism between Mr Micawber, the representative of life, and Uriah Heep in terms of a chivalrous duel: 'The gauntlet, to which Mrs. Micawber referred upon a former occasion, being thrown down in the form of an advertisement, was taken up by my friend Heep, and led to a mutual recognition' (36.454). In this context, Micawber's name may be regarded as alluding to the *danse macabre* or the valiant Maccabees (cf Handel's oratorio), fighting against the deadly enemies of the Jews.
- 16 'Now I am in the garden at the back ... where the fruit clusters on the trees, riper and richer than fruit has ever been since, in any other garden' (2.13).
- 17 Heinrich von Kleist, 'Über das Marionettentheater,' *Sämtliche Werke*, ed C. Grützmacher (Munich: Winkler 1967), 945-51, esp 950-1. On Dickens's concept of a return to paradise, see W.H. Auden, 'Dingley Dell and the Fleet,' in *The Dyer's Hand* (London: Faber and Faber 1963), 407-28.
- 18 The connection between Herbert's 'The Pilgrimage' and the figure of Mr Omer is underlined by the image of the chair. Cf 51.626 and Herbert's 'death is fair, / And but a chair.' *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed C.A. Patrides (London: Dent 1974) 151-2.
- 19 The *locus classicus* in English literature is Donne's 'Deaths Duell' sermon of 25 February 1631. See *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed E.M. Simpson and G.R. Potter, vol 10 (Berkeley: University of California Press 1962), 229-48.

- 20 See *Georgics* 4.304–9 and *King Alfred's Version of the Consolation of Boethius*, trans W.J. Sedgefield (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1900), 116 (35./III.). The scene is taken up again in *Sir Orfeo*; cf John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1970), 161.
- 21 See Friedman, 148 and 154.
- 22 For example, 34.419 ('It was like her cordial voice in my ears'); 35.435 ("Is it, indeed?" she said, in her cordial voice'); 62.734 ('I ... heard her cordial voice so earnest on the shadowy events of that imaginative world in which I lived'); and closely related expressions like 'I hear her beautiful calm voice, as I write these words' (16.198).
- 23 Ed R.P. Winnington-Ingram (Leipzig: Teubner 1963), especially 2.17 and 18; cf Friedman 80–4.
- 24 Graham Greene refers to Dickens' 'music of memory' in his essay on 'The Young Dickens,' *Collected Essays* (London: Bodley Head 1969), 101. Most pertinent in this context is Lothar Cerny's discussion of Dickens' concept of affective memory in *David Copperfield*. See his *Erinnerung bei Dickens* (Amsterdam: Grüner 1975), 59–88.
- 25 See Friedman, 100–2 and notes; 89 and notes.
- 26 David's formulation echoes Revelation 5:5: 'the root of David hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.'
- 27 In the *Alcestis*, Admetus speaks of Orpheus' successful catabasis (357–9). Cf Charles Segal, *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1989), 155–7.
- 28 On this illustration, see Michael Steig, *Dickens and Phiz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1978), 123–4.
- 29 Quoted from the Oxford Illustrated Edition of *Dombey and Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, repr 1987), 226.
- 30 Dickens, in a speech on 8 October 1860, said he regarded music 'as suggestive of all fancies. ... it can give back the dead; it can place at your side the congenial creature dear to you who never lived.' *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed K.J. Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1960), 297.
- 31 Without any mention of its syntactic ambiguity, the passage is discussed by William Lankford, "'The Deep of Time": Narrative Order in *David Copperfield*,' *ELH* 46 (1979), 452–67; see 454.
- 32 On this mythical concept, see Cerny, 73 and 152–3.
- 33 Forster, 1:336–8.
- 34 See, for instance, Matthew 1:1. Cf E. Pearlman's observation about David's role in Dr Strong's school: 'But soon Trotwood replaces the old fist boy, whose name is Adams; he becomes the new Adams' ('Two Notes on Religion in *David Copperfield*,' *VN* 41 [1972], 19). The 'new Adam,' of course, is Christ.
- 35 Cf Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1953, repr 1973), 96.
- 36 Strictly speaking, only the link between David and Christ is typological; the connection between Orpheus and Christ is an example of semi-biblical typology flourishing in the late Middle Ages. The 'parallel' connection

- between David and Orpheus is an example of symphronesis. Among the literature on the subject, I found most helpful Klaus Heitmann, 'Orpheus im Mittelalter,' *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 46 (1963), 252–94; Friedman, especially 148; Friedrich Ohly, 'Typologische Figuren aus Natur und Mythos,' in *Formen und Funktionen der Allegorie*, ed W. Haug (Stuttgart: Metzler 1979), 126–66; the essays by Eleanor Irvin, 'The Songs of Christ,' and Patricia Vicari, 'Sparagmos: Orpheus among the Christians,' in *Orpheus: Metamorphoses of a Myth*, ed John Warden (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1982), 51–62 and 63–83.
- 37 Theological interest was marked by the appearance of Patrick Fairbairn's seminal work, *The Typology of Scripture*, 2 vols (London 1845–7). On typology in nineteenth-century literature and art, see George P. Landow, *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1980) and Friedrich Ohly, 'Typologie als Denkform der Geschichtsbetrachtung,' in *Natur, Religion, Sprache, Universität: Universitätsvorträge 1982/83* (Münster: Aschendorff 1983), 68–102.
- 38 See, for instance, *Song of Myself*, stanzas 37, 38, and 41. On the connection between Orpheus and Christ, see Inge Leimberg, 'Zur Tradition der Motive in Walt Whitmans *Leaves of Grass*,' *Nachrichten der Giessener Hochschulgeseellschaft* 35 (1966), 91–105. In England, Robert Browning's 'Saul' is a good example of the typological connection between the life-giving poet David and Christ. See Linda H. Peterson, 'Biblical Typology and the Self-Portrait of the Poet in Robert Browning,' in *Approaches to Victorian Autobiography*, ed G.P. Landow (Athens: Ohio University Press 1979), 235–68.
- 39 See Robert L. Wyss, 'David,' *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed E. Kirschbaum, vol 1 (Freiburg: Herder 1968), 477–90, esp 485 and 487.
- 40 In English poetic theory, Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* contains the classical formulation of this concept; see G. Shepherd's edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1973), 101.
- 41 'There is no alloy of self in what I feel for you' (62.737).
- 42 Calderón's play was translated by Dickens' contemporary Edward Fitzgerald under the title *Such Stuff As Dreams Are Made Of*; see *The Variorum and Definitive Edition of the Poetical and Prose Writings of Edward Fitzgerald*, ed George Bentham, vol 5 (1902; repr New York: Phaeton Press 1967), 95–196.
- 43 The similarity between David and Prospero has been pointed out by Harry Stone, *Dickens and the Invisible World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1979), 278.
- 44 Cf *Metaphysics* 1048 a–b.
- 45 Quoted from the Oxford Illustrated Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press rep 1987), 11.
- 46 1.5 (Leishman trans, 43).